Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at
http://download.archiveofourown.org/works/1754449.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	Fire Emblem: Kakusei | Fire Emblem: Awakening
Relationship:	My Unit/Sallya | Avatar/Tharja
Character:	Sallya | Tharja, Male My Unit | Avatar, Lucina (Fire Emblem), A few cameos from other characters
Additional Tags:	Canon Compliant, Canon-Typical Violence
Series:	Part 1 of The Memoirs of the Tactician Robin
Stats:	Published: 2014-06-07 Completed: 2014-06-10 Chapters: 4/4 Words: 5257

Dire Combustion

by renouncingChance

Summary

Struggling under the weight of recent revelations, and faced with the military might of Valm, Robin faces a difficult and potentially monstrous decision.

Set in and around Chapter 14; potential spoilers for the whole game.

Notes

The Fire Emblem series has always done a good job of exploring the consequences of war, and of the protagonists' actions - to take the best example, think of the oppressive occupation of Daein in Radiant Dawn, which is an indirect, unintended consequence of the events of Path of Radiance. In general, I felt that Awakening was a little lacking on that front - Plegia's legitimate grievances against Ylisse were a nice touch, but there's nothing comparable after the death of Gangrel. Walhart may be out to stop Grima, but he's still pretty much a bad'un. I thought there were plenty of missed opportunities for a nice bit of moral ambiguity, and this fic deals with what I felt to be the most flagrant of these.

In addition, Robin's state of mind at what must be one of their lowest points in the story is something that interests me a lot. Sometimes in canon Robin can seem a bit flat, a little bit all things to all people. I like to see them as being by necessity quite calculating; capable of great warmth, but ultimately someone who deals in abstractions and probabilities as far as possible, as much out of self-defence as anything.

Extract

[An extract from the memoirs of the tactician Robin.]

In the course of both the Plegian and Valmese campaigns, I created and enacted many successful strategies. As with any tactician, my measure of "success" is simply that they ensured victory for my side in exchange for the smallest possible cost. All of these strategies, as with any wartime measure, required some measure of sacrifice and, while I always tried to keep loss of life to a minimum, naturally the lives of the enemy soldiers did not feature in my calculations.

In general, scholars and bards have seemed to understand this; the former have approved my strategies, while the latter have sung my praises, quite literally. There is one incident, however, of which even some of my strongest supporters seem unable to entirely approve. Many accounts of the Valmese war regard the only naval skirmish of the war with horror and vitriol, while those which are determined to see me as some kind of saint prefer to bury it under faux-objectivity and excuses.

Unlike these latter poor excuses for scholars, I will not attempt to justify my actions, nor to pretend that I have not occasionally harboured grave doubts about them. I have, however, never regretted them. I did what was necessary, and what I still believe was the best course of action. I did a monstrous thing in pursuit of a greater good. If I am damned in the process, so be it. Posterity may judge me as it wishes.

Limbo

Robin stood by the edge of the sea, his eyes closed in appreciation of the long sought-after solitude. The brisk wind whipped his coat about him, chilling him considerably, but it was nothing. Better this than return to the others, and suffer under the weight of their curious glances; Chrom's crushing concern, Frederick's pointed questions, Gregor's forced joviality.

He could understand the reason, of course. Had it been anyone else, he himself would have harboured grave concerns for their welfare, not to mention dark suspicions. None of them knew (he hoped), but he had hardly slept since the night Lucina had revealed herself to them; the circles under his eyes were like great dark pits by now. He wandered around like one of the Risen, almost bumping into furniture, having difficulty following conversations.

It was not merely Validar's revelations which kept him awake, disturbing though they were. It was what had followed from that night forwards. His dreams, which previously had been a blur of images and sounds, had come into sharp and horrifying relief. They were much the same every night, albeit shuffled in different orders: friends everywhere dead by his hand, a dark shadow falling across the land, a sad young woman who stirred strange emotions astride a wyvern. He did not believe in premonitions, but nonetheless he doubted that such repeated visions could signify anything good.

He heard the sound of a footfall behind him, and winced at the interruption. The step was too light to be Chrom's, thank heavens, which also ruled out most of the Shepherds' male contingent, save perhaps Gaius or Ricken. It could be Maribelle, come to scold him once more for some minuscule infraction at table, or Miriel, seeking his opinion on some new hypothesis, or perhaps (he winced anew at the thought) Nowi, come to play one of her terribly energetic and above all *loud* games.

As the mysterious figure grew closer, he concentrated. If he did not know the company well enough to recognise them without sight, he was no tactician at all. There was a strange smell on the wind, probably some foreign perfume, and he didn't hear the swish of robes or a dress, which probably meant-

"Tharja."

A throaty chuckle sounded from a few feet behind him, and he inwardly sighed with relief at the correct guess. It would have been endlessly embarrassing had the visitor turned out to actually be, say, Gregor.

The Plegian dark mage padded her way delicately towards him. Actually, of all the people to interrupt him, Tharja was possibly the least worst option. At least she tended not to talk too much; she merely clung to him and made strange contented noises from time to time like a happy kitten. It was almost endearing, in a thoroughly unsettling way.

Now, it turned out, was different. "They're looking for you," she said, a note of annoyance in her husky voice. "Your *Shepherds*." She pronounced the last word as though its utterance caused her physical pain, and, in truth, Robin could hardly blame her. There was something so naively idealistic about the name; it was Chrom in a nutshell, really.

"I know," he replied simply. "That's precisely why I'm here."

He still hadn't turned around, but he heard Tharja chuckle again as she slipped her arms around his waist. He had given up trying to stop her making physical contact with him during the Plegian campaign; she always found a way to close whatever distance he put between them, not least in

battle, which played havoc with his plans and potentially put everyone in danger. Her constant presence had become a necessary evil, then it had proven quite useful as they began to partner up, until finally it had become oddly comforting. He had read stories of captives developing close bonds with their captors, and this felt distressingly in that region.

As she buried her face in his shoulder, he continued to stare out to sea, trying to ignore the muffled sounds. From time to time he fancied he could see a dark line on the horizon; the oncoming storm of Valm. He knew it was a fantasy, that their fleet was still many days away, if it was even assembled yet, but still he couldn't get the image out of his head. If he closed his eyes, the face of the Conqueror filled his vision, laughing in triumph. He had no idea what the man looked like, but that didn't stop him from imagining a bloated visage, twisted by hatred and avarice, the fires of hell burning in his eyes.

He sighed deeply. To his surprise, Tharja lifted her head from its prone position and gazed into as much of his face as she could see.

"You haven't been sleeping." It was a statement of blunt fact. He decided not to question her certainty on the matter.

"No. Not for a little while now."

"I can help you, you know," she said.

Robin snorted. Her suggestive comments were nothing new, but at a time like *this*? "I have no doubt. But not the kind of help I need."

"How do you know that?"

Something in her voice made him turn his head and look at her for the first time. She was wearing an expression he had never seen on her face before; her brow slightly furrowed and her mouth a thin line. It was an expression of concern, ill-suited to her face, as though she were doing a poor impersonation of Frederick.

"They don't know you. Those idiots. Not your *exalted* friend, not his saccharine sister. Not the annoying knight or the loner swordsman. Not the two airheads on the flying horses. Even grinning crow-boy doesn't know you like I do."

Under normal circumstances, words like that would have sent him running for the hills. Yet now they chilled him to the marrow in a very different way.

"I… I thought I'd built up some idea of myself in the last two years. But now…" He steeled himself for a moment, hoping his voice wouldn't falter again. He so hated displaying weakness. "Tell me what it is you 'know'. Please."

She gazed at him, and a smile slowly crept its way along her face as she leaned up to whisper in his ear.

"Power. That's what you are. The very essence of greatness, like nothing I've ever come across. I knew it the moment I saw you. All I've ever longed for."

"Did you know, then? That I was Validar's…" He trailed off, unable to vocalise it.

A flash of annoyance passed across Tharja's face. "That's not who you are. That's where you came from. Who cares about that?"

"But…"

“Did you ask me for my back story when I joined you? Of course not. Why would you? It doesn’t *matter*. Not anymore. Your father is irrelevant. You’ve grown beyond him.”

“Grown into what?”

“Whatever you want to be. That’s what people don’t understand about power. It’s a tool, not an end. It does what you want it to. And while it’s doing that, it shapes you. Makes you better.”

She moved around to face him. This was rare too; normally she liked to stay just behind or beside him. In his shadow.

“If you wanted to, you could lead this army. Mould it in your image. Find this fool Walhart and grind him into the dirt from whence he came. Then, after you’ve crushed him, go after Validar. Make him crawl at your feet and call you master. Rule over both continents. You could stop all those brigands, send armies after the Risen. Cast aside the cowardly fools who call themselves Ylissean nobility, and elevate those of real ability. Make everything better.”

“You think me a king?”

“You’re a leader. That much is clear to everyone with a working pair of eyes. They all follow you. Some of them probably don’t know why, but they do it anyway.”

“They follow my *orders*. My plans. I’m not the leader of this army.”

“Aren’t you? Who composes every strategy we follow? Decides every move we make? Royal blood and the ability to swing a sword around are nothing compared to what’s inside you. If you were to take up the mantle in earnest, no-one would be able to resist.”

She grabbed his hand. She had never dared to do this before, perhaps never feeling herself worthy, but now there was a note of appeal in her eyes.

“Let me bask in the glow of your power. I’ll be with you the whole way, wherever you go. I have to be.”

Robin stared at her. He had always taken the strange light in her eyes to be lust, whether for power or flesh, but now… there was something else there. Devotion, maybe. After all, she was Plegian; she must have been raised to follow Grima, like those strange puppetlike soldiers who had stood at Gangrel’s side. And yet… there was more life in her than in any of them. And devotees didn’t usually try to instruct or guide the objects of their worship.

She drew even closer to him. “So what do you want to be?”

He turned his head. He looked at the inn where the others were staying. He could hear the music and laughter from here. He looked further, imagined himself seeing across the vast plains of Regna Ferox, to the castles of Basilio and Flavia, those towers of strength. In his mind’s eye he saw the beauty of Ylisstol, saw Emmeryn in her infinite kindness and her final sacrifice. He even saw Plegia, the ordinary people who had helped them, at great personal risk, and that general who had pleaded for the lives of his men with his dying breath. In a moment, he saw it all and knew his reply:

“A tactician.”

Inferno

Chapter Notes

Warnings for vomiting and mild violence.

The company had been at sea for several days by the time Robin felt he was beginning to get over his seasickness. It was a relief on numerous levels, since he had been finding it rather difficult to hold councils of war with his upper body hanging over the side of the ship. To make things worse, though many of the others claimed never to have been to sea, no-one else seemed to be suffering as he was. Admittedly, Sumia, Cordelia and Cherche all seemed to be spending more time airborne than was strictly necessary, but he could hardly accuse them of doing too much scouting.

The endless sea which had brought him such relief on land now seemed to be mocking him, reminding him that he was in its territory, subject to its whims. He knew too that he had several days of this torment to endure yet. He was almost praying that they would run into the Valmese fleet at some point so that he could find some relief in fighting desperately for his life.

He stood leaning on the rail and gazing out to starboard. He had come to habitually adopt this position out of hard-won caution, but he also found it comforting. Here, he could sniff the air, watch the waves and feel, briefly, free. It was also a good position from which to survey the ship which contained those Shepherds who were not thought strictly necessary to strategic planning; which, in his head, he had come to sardonically name the “party boat”. Admittedly, any ship that contained Miriel was unlikely to inherently lend itself to much frivolity, but he fancied they found a way. Perhaps they had locked her in a cabin.

If he squinted, he thought he could make out the dark shape of Tharja standing at the port rail of that ship. She almost always seemed to be there, as though anticipating his gaze. He knew he ought to find it disturbing, and yet the thought of her presence had come to be like a charm to him. Even being separated from her like this felt odd, as though his shadow had suddenly ceased to be there. And yet she had accepted the news that they were to travel separately quite passively, not at all as he had predicted. Perhaps she felt her work on him was done.

Thoughts of her seemed to come unbidden to his mind increasingly often. He could hardly tell as much to anyone, even if he’d wanted to; he’d heard enough songs to know what they would assume that to signify. Yet “love”, in the conventional sense, didn’t seem to fit his feelings about her – nor, thankfully, did “hex”. She was ever-present, partner and acolyte, and that was as he wanted it, and yet…

He shook his head vigorously. The army did not need its chief tactician struggling with his feelings like an adolescent on what could be the eve of battle. He had never subscribed to the notion that emotion inherently weakened one’s judgement, but there was no denying that a cool head was desirable, as much for appearances as anything.

He only realised that Lucina had come up beside him when her flat voice interrupted his brooding:

“I don’t know who you are.”

He blinked in confusion, taking a few moments to register the bizarre statement.

“I’m sorry?”

“I never heard of you in the future. I grew up on stories of the heroes who served alongside my father: Sir Frederick, Lady Cordelia… Sir Vaike.” She put the smallest of questioning inflections on the “sir” that preceded Vaike’s name, and Robin could hardly blame her. “But no-one ever told me about you. And yet in this time everyone looks to you, even Father. How could that be?”

Robin stared at her. Her eyes were hard as always, but he didn’t sense any malice coming from her. She genuinely wanted to know the answer just as he did. He only wished he could give it to her.

“I mustn’t be important to your future. Perhaps I… died early on? Or Chrom never found me?”

Lucina shook her head, seemingly out of disappointment at the lameness of his answers. “That can’t be. I’ve seen you fight. You’re instrumental to my father’s battles. He would never have defeated Gangrel without you. You’re his closest advisor and friend. My mother’s too. Even if you’d died, maybe especially if you had, your name would be on everyone’s lips. And if my father had never found you, none of this could be possible.”

“How do you know that? The others are more than capable of victory without me.”

There was something strange in her eyes now. “I’m not sure, but… I think I do know your daughter.”

“My... What?”

Now it was Lucina’s turn to stare out to sea. “I might be wrong. But I had an ally… a friend… in the future. Her mother was half-mad with grief and rage, and her father… no-one ever talked about him. Even she couldn’t tell me much, except that he’d disappeared when she was young. But so many people disappeared. I don’t know why it stuck in my head…”

“Her mother… no, I shouldn’t.” He took a deep breath. “You said before that others came back with you. Did she…?”

“Yes. With luck, we’ll meet her. And maybe then, I’ll know…”

“Know what?”

She turned away from the rail and began to walk away. “A fancy. Don’t let it bother you. It’s likely I’m wrong anyway.”

Robin watched her as she moved away, before turning to look back at the other ship. Tharja seemed to have vanished. He sighed. Her presence would have been a welcome note of comfort after Lucina’s strange words. His absence from the future, Validar’s revelations, the hierophant doppelganger, his dreams… There was a puzzle here to be solved, and surmounting problems was his role in life. And yet…

He turned away from the rail. Lissa was out on deck, taking a stroll, or trying to find something to do. She had been quite insistent that she be allowed to gain her sea legs and help out where she could, rather than lying in a cabin all day (which, Robin had to admit, sounded rather inviting). When she caught his eye, she beamed and waved. Robin smiled wanly back. It was a poor return, but he feared it was all he was capable of.

She called a greeting, but it was drowned out by the beating of heavy wings. Robin turned to see Sumia, an uncharacteristically grim look on her features, flying next to the side of the ship, for all the world as though she had just risen from the depths of the ocean. He knew the words even

before she said them.

“Valmese fleet. Dead ahead.”

The Valmese troops were as formidable as he had feared. A quick glance around told him that there were a number of elite troops on the three ships which surrounded them, even aside from the general. Besides that, several pegasus knights were winging their way in from other ships. If this was the vanguard of an invasion force, it seemed the military might of Valm had not been exaggerated. In fact, it almost seemed a somewhat larger reflection of the Ylissean contingent.

He had long argued for the efficacy of a small elite strike team aside from the main army, especially when outnumbered. It was in all the stories – the Greil Mercenaries; the small band who saved Elibe (both of them, in two generations); even Marth had had a contingent of powerful and dedicated followers. In truth, Robin didn’t feel he needed the precedent of long-gone legends, but they proved useful in making a point. Just say the name “Ike” or “Roy”, and it was a rare commander whose eyes wouldn’t light up. Chrom was certainly no exception, having grown up on tales of his illustrious ancestor.

The plan, at least the first part of it, was simple – kill the general and throw the army into disarray. It was a classic strategy – it seemed every country had their own macabre saying about cutting the heads off animals - and every general worth their salt knew it; hence the difficult opposition here.

Yet Robin knew the capabilities of his soldiers (despite what he said, he had always thought of them as “his” on some level), and he had faith in them. The lightning strikes of the two pegasus knights, Chrom and Lucina battling side by side, the indomitable strength of Gregor, Lon’qu’s unparalleled skill. And then there was Tharja, whose mere presence seemed to lend power to his own already formidable magic, who chuckled morbidly as she struck down enemy soldiers, as though their deaths were part of an elaborate joke which she alone understood.

As the Valmese approached from all directions, he shouted some brief orders. Defence of their position was in fact not a difficult prospect. Their attackers could only board in single file, rendering their numbers meaningless. Any support from mages or archers could be easily taken out by the fliers. As the clash of metal on metal sounded, he closed his eyes and visualised the battlefield from an aerial perspective. Let’s see… with the general *there*, it was a matter of either outlasting or breaking through their lines before strik-

An almighty crash broke across his thoughts, and he opened his eyes to see the body of a pegasus and rider in front of him. They had been killed with the same burst of wind magic; the rider had fallen and cracked his skull on the deck as his mount had been buffeted from the sky. He glanced up to see Tharja, Arcwind tome at the ready, giving him a look of mingled reproach and amusement. He nodded in terse thanks before throwing a lightning bolt of his own at an armoured knight who was giving Gaius some trouble.

The rest was chaos, and he revelled in it, visualising its flow and controlling it as he could. As the battle raged, he noticed with a mixture of concern and grudging respect that the discipline of the Valmese equalled their strength at arms. They worked in small teams, charging one after another at what they perceived to be the weak spots in the Ylissean forces. A less well-prepared force would have buckled in minutes - Robin allowed himself a brief flash of pride at the thought.

Even while fighting, he found his attention drawn by Lucina. This was their first true battle

together, and he had decided already to use the opportunity to assess her skills, which, as it turned out, were exceptional. She had all of her father's strength, but combined with the grace and speed of a swordmaster. She must have trained with one in the future; as he roasted a man alive in his armour, Robin made a mental note to ask her about that later.

The Valmese ranks were thinning, and he carefully positioned himself next to Lucina, judging her to be the best-placed for the final push. Only a single axe-wielder stood between them and the general. He raised his hand, but the jet of fire had not yet left it when a burst of dark magic sent the man right over the side of the ship. He nodded to Tharja in appreciation, before thumping Lucina on the shoulder to grab her attention and pointing at the exposed general.

The end came quickly. As the general turned to face the flame which billowed towards him, Lucina's rapier darted expertly between the plates of his armour and directly into his heart. He died with barely a sound, such that it took the forces of both sides several moments to realise what had happened.

The handful of Valmese soldiers remaining threw down their arms. Chrom gave Robin a questioning glance. Robin shook his head. Prisoners could not be a part of the plan. They would have to take their chances.

The men who had surrendered did not see Chrom's signal, or did not understand it if they did, but they could not fail to understand everyone sprinting for the sides of the ships, the magic users casting fireballs behind them as they ran. As he floated down to the sea on a small cushion of wind, Robin wondered what they thought was happening. In normal circumstances, he probably would have pitied them. But such feelings could not be allowed in this situation.

Within minutes, he found himself back on the flagship. Chrom and Lucina had both wrangled a ride on Sumia's pegasus, and so all three were already awaiting him, appearing to revel in their dryness. Together they stood on the forecastle, watching as the burning fleet moved inexorably closer to the intact Valmese one.

Closer… Ever closer… Then-

Robin turned away at the moment of impact. As an almighty cheer rang out behind him, he sprinted for the other side of the ship and retched violently. He did not stop heaving until the last embers had died out and the sea was still as before.

Purgatory

Hours later, Robin was alone on the deck. Somehow, the scent of burning flesh had slunk its way across the water, as though following the fleet, and everyone else on the ship had found excuses to be below decks. He wanted nothing more than to join them; to stick his head in a barrel of fish for some small measure of relief. He couldn't allow himself, though. He had to face this.

None of the others seemed to be feeling anything comparable. Basilio and Flavia were steely as ever; to show this kind of weakness was probably punishable by death in Regna Ferox. Frederick was pragmatic as ever, even attempting to estimate the number of casualties, which had caused more convulsions in Robin's aching stomach. Even Chrom, who always cared too much, seemed too set on their destination to give much thought to the thousands of men they had just burned alive. Then again, none of them had made the decision. It wasn't any of their weight to carry.

In his mind's eye, thousands of new-made Valmese widows sat huddled by the fire on a cold night, trying to calm the howling infant on their knees. Perhaps (his stomach did more acrobatics) some of those women had joined the army to be with their men, or the other way around. Perhaps love had blossomed on those ships, and lovers of all stripes had clung to each other in terror as the searing flames edged towards them. Perhaps – no, undoubtedly – thousands of children would grow up orphans because a tactician with no memory had decided he would rather their parents died in screaming agony than take the risk of fighting them in open combat.

He might have gnashed his teeth, torn out his hair, beat his fists against the rail of the ship, wailed to the impassive emptiness of the night sky. He did none of these things. He simply stared into the dark sea until it seemed to swallow him and his thoughts as it had swallowed the husks of the Valmese ships, until in all existence there was only the sea, churning and grinding as it had always done and would continue to do long after his bones had crumbled to dust.

He had been staring out for a long time before he became aware of the shadow which had been lurking behind him, perhaps since he had first climbed onto the ship hours before. Realising she had been discovered, she shuffled closer to him.

"What are you doing on this ship?"

She inhaled deeply, as though savouring the foul smell on the wind. "You were intoxicating in that battle. I couldn't bear to be parted from you. Besides, I wanted a good view of the carnage."

"And what did you make of it?"

She chuckled by way of reply. "I should be asking you that. Do you understand now? This is a fraction of what you're capable of. Today is the day Valm gets its first glimpse of the might of Robin. I bet the Conqueror is trembling."

"It was a strategy, not a showcase of power. And it wasn't magic that did the damage, it was timber and oil."

"I know *that*." She draped her arms over his shoulders and pressed her ample chest to his back. "But did you notice how no-one questioned it? No-one had the slightest doubt in their mind about this glorious brutality? That's your power right there."

"It wasn't brutal, it was necessary."

"Same thing."

“And people went along with it because they trust me.”

“The people close to you, sure. But not everyone in this fleet knows you personally. The Robin they know is just a name, an emblem, the shadowy figure from which their orders originate. Power isn’t just throwing lightning at people. It’s being able to make thousands of your own people end the lives of thousands of your enemies with a single word.”

“Power… it’s a means to an end, didn’t you say before? If I do have it, as you say, then it has to be used properly. For what’s right.”

“It will be. Whatever the person with power decrees is right *is* what’s right.”

“You must put together a book of your monstrous aphorisms someday.”

“Think of it this way: followers of Naga and of Grima have different morals, different ideas of what’s ‘right’, as you say. Where do those ideas come from? From their leaders, their priests, and ultimately from their gods. From those with power.”

“That doesn’t mean there’s no such thing as good or bad.”

“Maybe not. But good and bad aren’t the same as right and wrong.”

“I must say, this is the first time I’ve had a philosophical debate with somehow who was clinging to me this tightly. Even with amnesia, I think I can say that with some certainty.”

They were both silent for a while. The smell seemed to be lessening, or perhaps Robin was just getting used to it. Either way, it was a blessing.

“In fact... I don’t remember having this kind of debate before at all. In the last two years nobody’s really challenged me. There’s been suspicion, sure, but nobody has ever really questioned me. Or caused me to question myself. Until you.”

He felt Tharja lay her head on his shoulder and smiled despite himself. The ship was more silent than he had ever heard it before, and he revelled in it.

Finally he had to ask: “It’s fairly clear that we have… differing outlooks. And yet you’re still drawn to me. Why is that?”

“I’ve told you already. It’s your power. No mage worthy of the name would be able to stay away from it. Besides, I have to try to wake you up so you can take control of it. Become what you were born to be. Whatever you decide that is.”

“I understand that. But, well, not to put too fine a point on it… you’re terrifying. And I’m not. I hope. It seems strange that you still think we’re… compatible.”

“Don’t you think so?”

There was a long silence. When Robin spoke, his voice was barely above a whisper. “Yes. I do.”

She let go of him in surprise as he suddenly turned around and looked straight at her. But it was as nothing to her surprise when he put his arms around her and drew her close to him. He felt her tense up, then slowly relax as she returned the embrace.

“Wherever you lead, I follow,” she purred. “I’ll be the first among your followers.”

“No,” he replied, and she looked up in surprise at the sharpness of his tone. “The last thing I want

is for you to be some unquestioning ‘follower’. You’ll be by my side. Through whatever comes.”

Slowly, her face broke into a smile. She closed her eyes as he laid his head gently against hers. They stood like that for a long time in the darkness, alone together, as the waves crashed about them and the wind howled and screamed.

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